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ABSTRACT

Seven charts contain a summary of information obtained from two national surveys of elective literature programs which were conducted in spring and fall 1974. All persons connected with the program were English teachers or department chairpersons in junior or senior high schools. In the first survey 54 people were contacted and responded to the printed survey and a later telephone interview. In the second survey 3[illegible] of the initial 54 persons responded to the survey; there was no followup telephone interview. The purpose of these surveys was to obtain information on classroom practices in the teaching of literature electives in high schools today. Some of the questions asked in the surveys were: Can you give the names of three elective courses in literature that are particulary popular with today's students? Is it still important to cover American literature or British literature per se in the high schools? Do you feel a literature program should attempt to teach reading skills? Can you name any good literary selections which you feel all high school students should meet somewhere in literature courses? It is still important for students to study the genre as well as the selections themselves? (TS)

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# The Elective Program in Literature

## Results of National Surveys Conducted by

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The enclosed charts contain a summary of information obtained from two national surveys in the Spring and Fall, 1974. The purpose of these surveys was to obtain information on classroom practices in the teaching of literature electives in high schools today.

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National Council of Teachers of English
New Orleans Nov., 1974

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Procedures

1. First Survey

A list of 70 English teachers and/or Department Chairmen were identified from the NCTE Convention Program, 1973. All persons contacted were participants in the program, either as speakers, recorders, or chairpersons. All were connected to a junior or senior high school, not a university.

Of the 70 identified, 54 were contacted and responded to the survey.

English teachers to be contacted were initially mailed a copy of the questionnaire and a cover letter a week prior to a telephone interview. The letter asked them to consider the questionnaire in practical terms, in terms of what actually is going on in literature classes.

Teachers were told when they would be telephoned for the information.

A practicing high school English teacher was used for the telephone conversations. All telephoning was done in Random House on April 22, 23 and 24.

Some participants had called a special English Department meeting to obtain this information from the entire staff. Others had contacted department chairmen in other schools to add their opinions. Thus the survey reached a broader sampling than the 54 schools contacted.

Because this was a telephone conversation, the participants were able to give additional comments which give a richer picture to the situation. Wherever possible, these comments have been summarized or quoted along with answers to the questions.

Information from this survey is contained on Charts 1-5.

2. Second Survey

A second questionnaire was mailed to the 54 persons who responded to the survey, in September, 1974.

Thirty-four persons responded.

No follow-up telephone interviews were conducted.

Information from this survey is contained in Charts 6-7.

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CHART I.

Question: Can you give names of three elective courses in literature that are particularly popular with today's students?

| Content of Elective Course | % | Significant Titles |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Science Fiction | 37% | "Science Fiction & Gothic Literature"<br>"Science Fiction and Society" |
| 2. Media and Film | 31% | "Media and Persuasion"<br>"Good Movies--Better Books" |
| 3. Personal Identity/ Social Questions | 30% | "The Search for Identity"<br>"Law, Politics and Literature"<br>"Literature and Women" |
| 4. Study of Specific Genre | 30% | "Biographies and Life Styles"<br>"The Performing Arts" |
| 5. American Literature | 24% | "American Heroes"<br>"Dig U.S.A." |
| 6. Fantasy/The Supernatural | 22% | "The Abnormal Mind" (Poe, etc.)<br>"American Mind--Dream Experience" |
| 7. Modern Literature | 20% | "Book of the Month" (Best Sellers)<br>"Rock Literature" |
| 8. Folklore and Mythology | 19% | "Archtypal Myths"<br>"Myth and Fantasy" |
| 9. Religious Literature | 19% | "Bible as Literature"<br>"Religious Lit: East & West" |
| 10. Humor and Satire | 15% | "American Humor"<br>"Comedy in Literature" |
| 11. Ethnic/Minority Studies | 13% | "Prejudice in Literature"<br>"The American Indian" |
| 12. Reading Skills | 11% | "Individualized Reading"<br>"Speed Reading" |
| 13. Children's Literature | 7% | "Children and Their Literature"<br>"Sex-Stereotyping in child Lit" |
| 14. Detective Literature | 7% | "History of the Mystery"<br>"Spy and Detective Literature" |
| 15. Sport Literature | 6% | "Sport Heroes" |

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CHART 2

Question: Is it still important to cover American Literature and/or British Literature per se in the high schools?

YES

Forty-five per cent of the schools still teach American and/or British Literature. However, only 30% of these schools offer the traditional survey course.

Comments: These comments were made by schools who answered YES to the question.

"Yes, definitely, for the advanced students.
For the college-bound only.
Yes, and World Literature too.
Yes, we still believe in the survey.
Yes, but not in the chronological sense.
It's offered, but not required.
We cover American more than British.
We're trying to include it, but not sticking to it.
Chronology is offered early (by grade 10); then the thematic approach."

NO

Forty per cent of the schools do not teach American and/or British Literature.

Comments: These comments were made by schools who answered NO to the question.

"It's out--Thank God!
That concept is ten years old.
This concept will disappear and the commonality of man's expression will become important.
Never chronologically!
There is no need for a survey. It only justifies the teacher's degree.
There is little interest in British Literature today.
The Moffitt approach is the way to go--how to handle literature, not what kind it is.
Never teach early writers in British and American Literature!"

Uncertain

Fifteen percent.

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CHART 3.

Question: Do you feel a literature program should attempt to teach reading skills?

YES

Seventy-four percent of the teachers questioned replied YES to the question.

Comments: "Absolutely! Definitely! We're raising a generation of non-readers.
This is very important and should be stressed.
More needed. We have problems because this hasn't been done.
Every teacher is a reading teacher.
And it should be mandatory!
This is the basis of understanding the literature.
We are moving this way. But most teachers don't know how.
Reading skills should be integrated into the program.
Reading skills should be pinpointed and named.
Skills should be taught in each unit or in a special chapter.
Comprehension and interpretive skills related to the selection.
Should be done at the lower level, junior high.
Should not be done with books, because non-readers hate books already. Some other way.
Should not be done in the 'elementary school' way."

NO

Seventeen percent of the teachers questioned replied NO.

Comments: "Good idea, but I can't see how it can be done.
Forget it! Motivation is the strongest factor, not reading skills.
Not the purpose of a literature program.
Not in senior high school.
Too difficult to do and teach literature as well."

Uncertain

Nine percent.

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CHART 4

Question: Can you name any good literary selections (poems, plays, short stories) which you feel all high school students should meet somewhere in literature courses?

NO

Forty percent of the teachers questioned answered NO to this request.

Comments: "Everything depends on student response. If the student doesn't dig a literary work, he shouldn't have to read it. In the Moffitt style, students should be on a quest.
The greater problem is getting students to read at all!
No one literary work is necessary for all students.
It's not possible to say any more.
The only criteria: Some classics, some contemporary.
Literature study should be based on the English language, not on specific authors or works.
The question is too difficult to answer."

YES

Forty percent of the teachers replied with a group of titles or authors. These are listed below, alphabetically.

LITERARY WORKS

Animal Farm
A Separate Peace
Beowulf
Brothers Karamazov
Catcher in the Rye
Death in the Family
Death on a Live Wire
Death of a Son Age One
Dog--Ferlingetti
Flowers for Algernon
Good Times, Bad Times
Grapes of Wrath
Great Gatsby
Huck Finn
Invisible Man
Little Prince
Lord of the Flies
Moby Dick
Myths and Folklore
Of Mice and Men
Our Town
Playboy Essays by G. Shepherd
Remembrance of Things Past
Tale of Two Cities
The Crucible
The Rievers
Tom Jones
To Kill a Mockingbird

AUTHORS

Baldwin
Chaucer
Dickens
Donne
Faulkner
Fitzgerald
Frost
Hawthorne
Hemingway
Hesse
Homer
Melville
Milton
Poe
Salinger
Sandburg
Saroyan
Shakespeare
Steinbeck
Thomas--Dylan
Thoreau
T. S. Eliot
Twain
Vonnegut
Whitman
Wilder
Yeats

Uncertain

Twenty percent

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CHART 5.

Question: Is it still important for students to study the "genre" as well as the selections themselves? For instance, the structure of a short story, a poem, etc.

YES

Seventy percent of the teachers responded YES to this question. Sixteen percent of these teachers qualified their answer by saying the teaching of genre should only be offered to college-bound students. Nine percent teachers felt it should be done in the junior high, before ninth grade.

Comments: "This is a reading skill in itself.
The genre, the structure, is the message.
Literature is the creation of form.
Not as important as the literary work itself.
OK--but don't go overboard.
Just a speaking familiarity with genre.
Techniques and appreciation of the genre should be taught.
Teaching of genre should be incorporated into thematic units."

NO

Nineteen percent of the teachers answered NO to this question.

Comments: "Ridiculous. The term is horrible.
Junior high kids are turned off by analysis.
Work it into the units. Should not be taught separately."

Uncertain

Eleven percent.

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CHART 6.

Question: Premise: Elective Programs have been criticized for a lack of continuity and coherence. With many electives to choose from, critics say that students are emerging with a minimal understanding of literature, because there are no absolute requirements and no follow-up for all students.

1. Is this a valid criticism of elective programs?

NO

Sixty percent of the teachers sampled answered NO to this question.

Comments: "I reject the basic premise--there is no such minimal knowledge which should be required of all students. Electives are person-centered, not subject-centered.
I do not find it disturbing that students are emerging with little knowledge of traditional classics.
The whole beautiful array of literary creations of all peoples of all times are to be sampled at will and in any order.
Electives give students a greater understanding of theme, structure and purpose in literature.
Learning is incidental, not programmed.
I feel that English is a skills subject. The precise literature is not so important as the ability to read, understand, analyze.
Long-range planning and regular evaluation can solve problem."

YES

Twenty-eight percent of the teachers sampled answered YES to this question.

Comments: "Too many English chairmen allow individual teachers too much freedom in planning courses. Teachers are teaching 'their own thing' and there is little continuity for the student.
The student frequently receives no guidance in selection of courses and almost never has supervision of over-all progress in language arts.
There is a proliferation of alternatives to the study of literature (media, film, etc.) and literature is neglected.
Teachers are too overburdened to do the necessary counseling.
Even a completely organized elective system cannot assure that the pupil moves from the easy to the difficult, from the basic to the sophisticated.
We are concerned that electives have opened the floodgates and that, in the process, scope and sequence have been washed out.
English teachers are selling the birthright of their discipline and the result has been more apathy rather than less as students sense that teachers have less and less conviction about the importance of their courses."

Uncertain: 12%

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CHART 7: Elective Plans which combine freedom of choice with sequential study.

PLAN A

Grade 9-10 * No electives. Students study basic skills, composition, literature.

Grade 11-12 * First semester: Basic composition
Second semester: Choose from 10 literature electives.

* Additional electives are provided in grades 9-12 for students who wish to enrich their English program.

PLAN B

Grades 9-12
High-Ability Students: No electives.
A carefully planned program in college prep and advanced placement courses.
Low-Ability Students: No electives.
Courses are remedial.
Average Ability Students: All Courses are elective. Pre-requisite system identifies easy and more difficult courses. Behavioral objectives are outlined for each course. Counseling accompanies student choice. Departmental exams insure accountability.

PLAN C

Grade 9: Uniform program for all.

Grades 10-12: Elective program for all.

1st quarter - Basic English skills. Same course for all students.
2nd " - Electives in Literature
3rd " - Language, Composition
4th " - Reading, Speaking and Listening.

PLAN D

Grades 9-10 Basic skills in English for all students: Vocabulary, Reading, Writing.
Grades 11-12 Electives for all students. Elective courses are built around the specialties of teachers involved. Elective courses must re-inforce and extend "Basic Skills" taught in grades 9-10.

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PLAN E

Grades 9-12

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1st quarter : | 1 | communication course |
| 2nd quarter : | 1 | literature elective |
| 3rd quarter : | 1 | literature elective |
| 4th quarter : | 1 | literature elective |

All students are separated into 3 ability levels. All elective courses are numbered-coded to identify ability level. Students may only choose electives to match, unless counselors make an exception.

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PLAN F

All students may choose electives. No grade levels are indicated, so a course may be elected by students on any grade level, 9 through 12.

Catalog identifies many courses in a hierarchy of sophistication. For instance: Journalism I, Journalism II, Journalism III. Each course is a pre-requisite to the next course in the hierarchy.

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PLAN G

Non-graded, mini-course program for grades 10-12.

All mini-courses are 9 weeks in length.
Thirty-two electives are offered in Literature, Speech, Theater, Writing.

One course is required during the three-year period: A 9-week course in Basic Oral Communications.